Session eleven:
Archival reference and research

LBSCI 730 Archival Appraisal, Arrangement, and Access

User

An individual who uses the collections and services of a repository; a patron; a reader; a researcher; a searcher.

Reference

A service to aid patrons in locating materials relevant to their interests; see reference interview.

Access

The ability to locate relevant information through the use of catalogs, indexes, finding aids, or other tools.

Accessibility

The characteristic of being easily reached or used with a minimum of barriers.

Archivist and user goals are DIFFERENT

Archivists:

1. Preservation
2. Access

Patrons, users, researcher, readers:

1. Research
2. Analyze
3. Interpret
4. Write

Archivists should not and cannot do (extended) research for a patron

Archival reference knowledges and competencies

Collection knowledges

Collection knowledges

Archivists can provide six kinds of information to users:

1. Information about the **repository**
2. Information *about* **the holdings**
3. Information *from* **the holdings**
4. Information about **record creators**
5. **Referrals** to other repositories or resources
6. Information about laws and ethics regarding the **use of information**

Interaction knowledges

User behavior

Who is using the archives' materials? Why?

How are they contacting you? How are they asking the question?

Who is the asker to you?

- What is the precedent from previous requests?
- What is your range of realistic outcomes?

Assessment methodologies

How do archivists know *what* to retrieve for a user?

What are they asking for?

What do they actually need?

Can we answer the question?

Can someone else answer the question?

How much assistance are you willing to give?

Question negotiation

Assessment methodologies

"Ambiguity on the part of users is frequently rooted in feelings of uncertainty or fear of seeming ignorant"

"Negotiating the question provides the opportunity for users to clearly state the research need themselves; it also discourages archivists from jumping to unwarranted conclusions."

"the first step in question negotiation is to analyze the query into component parts as "givens" (the subject) and "wanteds" (the information needed)."

"The negotiation process is necessary, because it allows the patron to define the information need more precisely; this permits the reference specialist to match the actual need against finding aids and sources available."

Information retrieval

How do archivists efficiently *retrieve* that material?

What's in your archive?

How do you find materials?

How do you access materials?

How will the user access materials?

Appointments and hosting

Information retrieval

Scheduling:

- Is the college open?
- Is SCA open and available to host?
- Can the researcher get here?
- Can you accommodate walk-ins?

Preparing materials:

- Confirm needed materials, retrieve boxes, set up research station

How to get here:

- Directions to campus, to library, to 317
- Parking pass?

When the researcher is here:

- let Access services know researcher is coming
- explain handling instructions to researcher
- be mindful of researcher and materials

Relevant legalities

How does the archivist *communicate* to the user how to use the materials *beyond* the reference visit?

What are our policies?

- Digital access
- Publication

Research knowledges

Domain knowledge

Subject knowledge; an understanding of the subject being researched by a user.

Artifactual literacy

The ability to understand, contextualize, and interpret primary sources, in part by taking into consideration their physical characteristics.

Archival intelligence

A person's knowledge of archival principles, practices, and institutions, and an understanding of the relationship between primary sources and their surrogates.

For many researchers, however, the archivist's processing of collections, which includes all work done by the archivist to make a collection available to researchers, remains a mystery… **We believe that if archival researchers know how to recognize the outcomes of archivists' processing and understand the principles behind processing decisions, they will have a better understanding of the archival materials they study**.

Understanding archival theory and principles and knowing the best practices derived from them will help researchers anticipate potential problems and assess the potential usefulness of the archival materials they consult.

Archival Research (Re)Defined

Sometimes, archival research involves following a Nancy Drew–like trail of clues that culminates in the rare, intriguing, "holy grail" find at the conclusion of the search—but not often. I've only had that experience once or twice in my professional life. In 1990, as I was researching educator George Jardine in Glasgow, Scotland, I came upon a decrepit and flimsy box housing 136 letters tied together with a faded red ribbon—letters written by Jardine over the course of his life. These letters held the genus of Jardine's teaching theories and pedagogy. I had found the mother lode—at least in this phase of my search for Jardine artifacts. I've had other "ah-hah!" moments involving archival finds that changed the trajectory of my research, but for the most part, archival research is somewhat tedious, involves following trails that fork, branch, or dissipate and rarely involves holy grail discoveries.

Ramsey, A. E., Sharer, W. B., L'Eplattenier, B., & Mastrangelo-, D. N. U. L. (Eds.). (2009). *Working in the archives : Practical research methods for rhetoric and composition*. Southern Illinois University Press.

Introduction

Library archives are strangely exciting places. They sit there, quiet stacks of books and old paper, silently humming with thousands of stories. Closed to random rummagers, guarded by librarians, the past seems to wait for someone to reach out to it. To open a box or a book on a page of old handwriting, with its browning ink on yellowing paper, requires a steady nerve. Having been discovered, the ancestors demand attention. We cannot simply close the box and leave them alone again.[1]

In the archival institutions that I gained access to, I felt pressured with only a few hours to get through the documents, knowing that the next day new boxes of data would arrive. I felt frustrated that I could not change my requests based on discoveries in the boxes I searched on one day, and that I would have to wait an additional two to three working days for the boxes that I chose. I often felt lost, as there were hundreds and hundreds of boxes to choose from with no real description, and my selections were circumstantial or just pure guesswork. In one archival institution,

Managing Expectations

Archival research is some of the most unpredictable work a historian can do. Some boxes open to reveal marvelous treasures. Others contain useless materials or copies of documents you have already seen. Still others offer tiny portions of the story that the historian can, with patient determination, build into something larger. One trip to the New-York Historical Society produced nothing of value for my research except for a 1921 pamphlet with an arresting six-word phrase: "The bus is young and honest," which I used for an article title. That was an afternoon well spent.[57]

Some days you find nothing. Some days you find sources that change your understanding of your project. You cannot control or predict what kind of day you will have. You can only open the next box.

Schrag, Z. M. (2021). The Princeton guide to historical research. Princeton University Press.

In some ways, **my research process was random**, as I sifted through folders that might or might not yield information useful to my study. In other ways, **this research process was ordered**; I developed a list of materials to look through, adding to that list as I learned of new resources and searching through these documents sequentially, folder by folder, box by box.

The **method itself was organic**, shaped by the research process itself and shaped by other key theoretical and pragmatic factors that I discuss in this chapter. In developing this method, I read what I could about archival methodology, but after finding few pragmatic suggestions for conducting archival research, **I ultimately found it was my entry into the archives itself that shaped my approach most significantly**.

selecting information that is useful precede the presentation or publication of the results. As scholars have pointed out, archival work can be tedious and time-consuming, and archival researchers usually have no formal training for the work they do but they have to learn on their own "how to search for documents, how to talk to archivists," how to treat the documents and findings, and how to subtract relevant information from them; they often have to learn through trial and error how to take notes and interpret their findings (Ramsey *et al.* 1, 3). Fortunately, the situation is gradually changing as conferences, workshops, and symposiums are being organized to discuss student involvement in archival work and the use of archives in research and teaching in general.[1] Another welcome sign is that universities are starting to offer rhetoric, composition, and literature courses in which archival recovery work is an

rediscovered by researchers. Therefore, any expectation for the completeness of historical sources (as defined by today's needs) is imprudent, which renders the accompanying criticism of the archives unfair. Perhaps the most troubling part of scientists' dismissals of the archives is that they are rarely corroborated with citations elaborating on the repositories accessed or the efforts undertaken to substantiate the claims of insufficiency.

Locating the disconnect

It is vital that scholars fundamentally reframe thinking about what the SKA actually is and represents. Lisa Stead (2019) argues that greater archival reflexivity is required by film historians to consider not only the archive as source but also as subject. It is necessary to ask whether the SKA is by, for, and about Stanley Kubrick (as it has largely been branded and as much of the archival catalogue often frames it) or is something much more complex. When reams of paperwork across many of the SKA's boxes do not even mention Kubrick and were not even created by him but by a myriad of administrators, secretaries, and other labourers, then what is meant by it being "the Stanley Kubrick Archive"? The very existence of the SKA and its continued administration and preservation is the result of the work not of Stanley Kubrick, but of often hidden, marginalised, or overlooked labourers, both historic (secretaries such as Margaret Adams) and continuing (by archivists like Georgina Orgill at the UAL). The SKA is primarily used by Kubrick scholars

Those four boxes, dating from the 1920s to the end of the century, largely contained arbitration Opinions and Awards, i.e., outcomes. In coming to better understand the arrangement of the massive collection of a century-old behemoth organization, I discovered that the incidents, choices, and negotiations leading to arbitrations and the aftermaths of arbitrations are dispersed throughout the collection in the files such as "Correspondence: Legal," or the files of Equity Council. These union officials' and counsel's pre- and post-dispute strategizing and interpersonal efforts to informally resolve conflicts are filed alphabetically by subject and boxed year.

AFW. (*shaking her fists at the gods*) WHY BY YEAR, NOT SUBJECT??

I groaned with the realization that a return visit would need to be quite lengthy as I would need to request a different box for each file that I wanted to review (see fig. 1). The NYU collections staff pages a maximum of six boxes per day.

Standing at her assigned table, AFW thumbs through the box and pulls out a file labelled, "Aliens:

Correspondence." She repeats the action, this time the file is "Committee: Duplication of Names."

Again and again, the same action. Sometimes, she snaps a picture, scribbles a note, stretches.

Against my training in methodical adherence to the logic of subject relevance, I selected files arbitrarily

(pun intended). The contents of some had zero to do with my topic and, frankly, bored me. Others

offered future lines of inquiry? Still others glimpsed the quotidian institutional context, organizational

concerns, and competing priorities contemporaneous with disputes. Thus, the significance of the

discrete disputes for the collective, the union, and the theatre industry took shape.

Like Palacios, I took all the photos of all the things, made notes, filled out permissions, eagerly awaited

the arrival of each box. And yet, unlike Palacios, and to my surprise, the pressure of time's waning and

grief for what I might miss was largely absent my experience. I had waited years, and at the most

fundamental level, I understood that a next time is an always uncertainty. So, I reveled in the being there

and the performance of archival research instead of anticipating the curtain call, to continue Palacios's

metaphor. I let curiosity share priority with gathering information. Consequently, time behaved

differently for me. Paradoxically, I seemed to have all the time in the world each day because I was

limited to six boxes per day. Each box placed on my table contained only one file that I "needed" to see

Obstacles of limited time, resources, and access beyond an individual researcher's control can all but foreclose hope. I am certainly not optimistic that such obstacles will be mitigated at local or global levels, given U.S. universities' ongoing defunding of the humanities and societal devaluation of history. Yet my experience makes me hopeful for the transformative potential of curiosity and arbitrariness as archival practices. At the time, I did not conceive of my meandering through files as resistance to the underlying values that place obstacles in our path. Those values prime us to fixate on the product of our archival endeavors instead of embracing the nature of the work, time bound as it is. Much like theatrical performance each moment in the archive matters, so why not choose to linger?

Unfortunately, mutual dependence does not always produce mutual respect and harmony. Historians can get frustrated with archivists who are the human representatives of institutions that may deny access to materials, either from scarcity of resources or a desire to restrict knowledge. Archivists can get frustrated with historians who fail to recognize their hard work and professional training. "Archival studies scholars and practicing archivists are more than willing to meet humanities scholars halfway," writes M. L. Caswell, "but there has to be a willingness to engage and a baseline of respect in interdisciplinary exchange that is currently lacking."[48]

Schrag, Z. M. (2021). The Princeton guide to historical research. Princeton University Press.

How do archivists bridge gaps in archival intelligence to the benefit of all users?

How do we convince users that archival intelligence is important?

How do we get users and researchers to *see* us and use us as archivists and not just as box jockeys?